

SUMMARY

Among the more frequently cited misapprehensions concerning U.S. policy in Vietnam is the view that the Eisenhower Administration flatly rejected intervention in the First Indochina War. The record shows plainly that the U.S. did seriously consider intervention, and advocated it to the U.K. and other allies. With the intensification of the French-Viet Minh war and the deterioration of the French military position, the United States was forced to take a position on: first, a possible U.S. military intervention in order to avert a Viet Minh victory; second, the increasingly likely contingency of negotiations between Paris and Ho Chi Minh to end the war through a political settlement. In order to avoid a French sell-out, and as an alternative to unilateral U.S. intervention, the U.S. proposed in 1954 to broaden the war by involving a number of allies in a collective defense effort through "united action."

The U.S. Government internal debate on the question of intervention centered essentially on the desirability and feasibility of U.S. military action. Indochina's importance to U.S. security interests in the Far East was taken for granted. The Eisenhower Administration followed in general terms the rationale for American interest in Indochina that was expressed by the Truman Administration. With respect to intervention, the Truman Administration's NSC 124 of February 1952 recognized that the U.S. might be forced to take some military action in order to prevent the subversion of Southeast Asia. In late 1953 - early 1954, as the fall of Indochina seemed imminent, the question of intervention came to the fore. The Defense Department pressed for a determination by highest authority of the size and nature of the forces the U.S. was willing to commit in Indochina. Some in DOD questioned the then operating assumption that U.S. air and naval forces would suffice as aid for the French. The Army was particularly concerned about contingency planning that assumed that U.S. air and naval action alone could bring military victory, and argued for realistic estimates of requisite land forces, including the degree of mobilization that would be necessary. The State Department thought that Indochina was so critical from a foreign policy viewpoint that intervention might be necessary. But DOD and the JCS, estimating that air-naval action alone could not stem the surging Viet Minh, recommended that rather than intervening directly, the U.S. should concentrate on urging Paris to train an expanded indigenous army, and should exert all possible pressures -- in Europe as well as in Asia -- to motivate the French to fight hard for a military victory. Many in the U.S. Government (the Ridgway Report stands out in this group) were wary that U.S. intervention might provoke Chinese Communist intervention. In the latter case, even a considerable U.S. deployment of ground forces would not be able to stem the tide in Indochina. A number of special high-level studies were unable to bridge the evident disparity between those who

held that vital U.S. interests were at stake in Indochina, and those who were unwilling to make a firm decision to intervene with U.S. ground forces to assure those interests. Consequently, when the French began pressing for U.S. intervention at Dien Bien Phu, the Eisenhower Administration took the position that the U.S. would not intervene unilaterally, but only in concert with a number of European and Far Eastern allies as part of a combined force. (Tab 1)

This "united action" proposal, announced publicly by Secretary Dulles on March 29, 1954, was also designed to offer the French an alternative to surrender at the negotiating table. Negotiations for a political settlement of the Franco-Viet Minh war, however, were assured when the Big Four Foreign Ministers meeting in February at Berlin placed Indochina on the agenda of the impending Geneva Conference. Foreign Minister Bidault insisted upon this, over U.S. objections, because of the mounting pressure in France for an end to the seemingly interminable and costly war. The "peace faction" in Paris became stronger in proportion to the "peace feelers" let out by Ho Chi Minh, and the lack of French success on the battlefield. U.S. policy was to steer the French away from negotiations because of the fear that Indochina would thereby be handed over to the communist "empire."

Secretary Dulles envisaged a ten-nation collective defense force to take "united action" to prevent a French defeat -- if necessary before the Geneva Conference. Dulles and Admiral Radford were, at first, inclined towards an early unilateral intervention at Dien Bien Phu, as requested by the French (the so-called "Operation Vulture"). But Congressional leaders indicated they would not support U.S. military action without active allied participation, and President Eisenhower decided that he would not intervene without Congressional approval. In addition to allied participation, Congressional approval was deemed dependent upon a public declaration by France that it was speeding up the timetable for independence for the Associated States.

The U.S. was unable to gather much support for "united action" except in Thailand and the Philippines. The British response was one of hesitation in general, and flat opposition to undertaking military action before the Geneva Conference. Eden feared that it would lead to an expansion of the war with a high risk of Chinese intervention. Moreover, the British questioned both the U.S. domino principle, and the belief that Indochina would be totally lost at Dien Bien Phu and through negotiations at Geneva. As for the French, they were less interested in "united action" than in immediate U.S. military assistance at Dien Bien Phu. Paris feared that united action would lead to the internationalization of the war, and take control out of its hands. In addition, it would impede or delay the very negotiations leading towards a settlement which the French increasingly desired. But repeated French requests for direct U.S. intervention during the final agony of Dien Bien Phu failed to alter President Eisenhower's conviction that it would be an error for the U.S. to act alone.

Following the fall of Dien Bien Phu during the Geneva Conference, the "domino theory" underwent a reappraisal. On a May 11 press conference, Secretary Dulles observed that "Southeast Asia could be secured even without, perhaps, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia." In a further remark that was deleted from the official transcript, Dulles said that Laos and Cambodia were "important but by no means essential" because they were poor countries with meager populations. (Tab 2)

DISCUSSION

- II. B. Tab 1 - The Interagency Debate over U.S. Intervention in Indochina
 Tab 2 - The Attempt to Organize "United Action"

II. B. 1.

THE INTERAGENCY DEBATE
OVER U.S. INTERVENTION IN INDOCHINA

TABLE OF CONTENTS AND OUTLINE

	<u>Page</u>
1. <u>The General Policy Context</u>	B-5
a. The Final Truman Program (NSC 124).....	B-5
b. Eisenhower Administration's "Basic National Security Policy".....	B-5
2. <u>The Question of Intervention with Ground Forces</u>	B-5
a. The Problem is Presented.....	B-5
b. NSC: State and Defense Views.....	B-6
c. The JCS View.....	B-7
d. Formation of Special Working Group on Indochina.....	B-7
e. Erskine Report, Part I: Motivate the French.....	B-8
f. The Erskine Report, Part II: Intervention Only After Geneva?.....	B-8
g. NSC 177 Annex Raises Intervention Question Anew.....	B-9
h. Army Questions Feasibility of Air-Naval Intervention and Outlines Ground Forces Requirements.....	B-10
i. Defense-JCS "Solution": Rectify French Deficiencies....	B-11
3. <u>The New Approach: "United Action"</u>	B-11
a. Presidential Decision to Support Only "United Action"...	B-12
b. Rejection of Unilateral Intervention.....	B-13

II. B. 1. THE INTERAGENCY DEBATE OVER U.S. INTERVENTION IN INDOCHINA

1. The General Policy Context

The debate over the wisdom and manner of American intervention in Indochina was based primarily on the desirability of military involvement, not on questions concerning Indochina's value to United States security interests in the Far East. The Eisenhower Administration was in general agreement with the rationale for American interest in Indochina expressed by the Truman Administration. The United States Government first came to full grips with the question of intervention in late 1953 -- early 1954 as the fall of Indochina seemed to become imminent.

a. The Final Truman Program (NSC 124)

NSC 124 (February, 1952) considered imperative the prevention of a Communist take-over in Indochina. It recognized that even in the absence of "identifiable aggression" by Communist China, the U.S. might be forced to take some action in order to prevent the subversion of Southeast Asia. In case of overt Chinese intervention, NSC 124 recommended: (1) naval, air and logistical support of French Union forces; (2) naval blockade of Communist China; (3) attacks by land and carrier-based aircraft on military targets in Mainland China. It stopped short of recommending the commitment of U.S. ground forces in Indochina. 1/

b. Eisenhower Administration's "Basic National Security Policy"

NSC 162/2, adopted in October, 1953, ten months after the Republican Administration took office, was the basic document of the "New Look." After commenting on U.S. and Soviet defense capabilities, the prospect of nuclear parity and the need to balance domestic economic policy with military expenditures, it urged a military posture based on the ability "to inflict massive retaliatory damage" on the enemy. Indochina was listed as an area of "strategic importance" to the U.S. An attack on such important areas "probably would compel the United States to react with military force either locally at the point of attack or generally against the military power of the aggressor." The use of tactical nuclear weapons in conventional war situations was recommended, but they were not specifically suggested for use in Indochina. 2/

2. The Question of Intervention with Ground Forces

a. The Problem is Presented

In late 1953, the Army questioned prevalent assumptions that ground forces would not be required in Indochina if the area was as important to U.S. security interests as the NSC papers stated. The Army urged that the issue be faced squarely in order to provide the best possible preparation for whatever courses of action might be undertaken. The Plans Division of the Army General Staff pointed out that under current

programs the Army did not have the capability of providing divisional forces for operations in Indochina while maintaining its existing commitments in Europe and the Far East. Army also suggested a "reevaluation of the importance of Indochina and Southeast Asia in relation to the possible cost of saving it." 3/

With the deterioration of the French military situation in Indochina, the first serious attention came to be given to the manner and size of a U.S. intervention. The question to be faced was: how far was the U.S. prepared to go in terms of force commitments to ensure that Indochina stayed out of Communist hands? The Defense Department, though not of a single mind on this question, pressed for an early determination of the forces the U.S. would be willing to dispatch in an emergency situation. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Robert Anderson, proposed to Secretary of Defense Wilson on January 6, 1954, that the U.S. decide immediately to employ combat forces in Indochina on the "reasonable assurance of strong indigenous support of our forces," whether or not the French Government approved. 4/ But Vice Admiral A. C. Davis, Director of the Office of Foreign Military Affairs in OSD, wrote:

"... Involvement of U.S. forces in the Indochina war should be avoided at all practical costs. If, then, National Policy determines no other alternative, the U.S. should not be self-duped into believing the possibility of partial involvement -- such as 'Naval and Air units only.' One cannot go over Niagara Falls in a barrel only slightly."

Admiral Davis then went on:

"Comment: If it is determined desirable to introduce air and naval forces in combat in Indochina it is difficult to understand how involvement of ground forces could be avoided. Air strength sufficient to be of worth in such an effort would require bases in Indochina of considerable magnitude. Protection of those bases and port facilities would certainly require U.S. ground force personnel, and the force once committed would need ground combat units to support any threatened evacuation. It must be understood that there is no cheap way to fight a war, once committed." 5/

b. NSC: State and Defense Views

The evident disparity between, on the one hand, our high strategic valuation of Indochina, and on the other, our unwillingness to reach a firm decision on the forces required to defend the area became the subject of the NSC's 179th meeting on January 8, 1954. At this meeting the Council discussed NSC 177 on Southeast Asia, 6/ but it decided not to take up the Special Annex to NSC 177 which laid out a series of choices which might face the United States if the French military position in Indochina continued to deteriorate. Nevertheless, the NSC at that time did make some headway on the problem it had posed for itself.

According to summary notes taken of the meeting, 7/ State and Defense were at considerable variance on what should be done in either of two contingencies: first, French abandonment of the struggle; second, a French demand for substantial U.S. forces (ground, sea, and air). The State view considered the French position so critical already as (in the rapporteur's words) to "force the U.S. to decide now to utilize U.S. forces in the fighting in Southeast Asia." The Defense representative refused to underwrite U.S. involvement. He reportedly stated that the French could win by the spring of 1955 given U.S. aid and given "improved French political relations with the Vietnamese... The commitment of U.S. forces in a 'civil war' in Indochina will be an admission of the bankruptcy of our political policies re Southeast Asia and France and should be resorted to only in extremity." He urged that every step be taken to avoid a direct American commitment.

The Council meeting reached two important conclusions, both fully in keeping with the Defense position. First, it decided that a discussion of contingencies for U.S. involvement missed the essential point that the French were capable of winning provided they gained native political and military cooperation. Second, NSC 177 was, as Defense suggested, inadequate in that the study failed to come to grips with the fact that eventual success in Indochina depended upon French ability to solve the problem of how to obtain Vietnamese support for the war effort.

c. The JCS View

The NSC meeting of January 8 still left open the question of U.S. action in the event troops were indisputably necessary to prevent the "loss" of Indochina. In this regard, the Joint Chiefs of Staff kept their options open. The Chiefs thought that the Navarre Plan was fundamentally sound, but was being steadily undercut by the gulf separating the French from the Vietnamese, by General Navarre's failure to implement U.S. recommendations, and by hesitancy in Paris over the necessary political concessions to the Bao Dai government. Yet JCS refused either to rule out the use of U.S. combat forces or to back unequivocally their employment. 8/

d. Formation of Special Working Group on Indochina

Dissatisfaction with NSC 177 and the NSC's subsequent failure in NSC 5405 9/ to resolve the ground force commitment issue led to the formation of a working group to evaluate the French military effort, to make recommendations concerning future U.S. contributions to it, and to devote attention to the various contingencies under which the U.S. might be called upon to intervene directly in the war. The working group, under the chairmanship of General G. B. Erskine (USMC, Ret.), was composed of representatives from the Departments of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs, and CIA. The group was responsible to NSC through General W. Bedell Smith, Under Secretary of State, who had been appointed by the Council to head the Special Committee on the U.S. and Indochina.

e. The Erskine Report, Part I: Motivate the French

The first section of Erskine's two-part report, dated February 6, 1954, was based on the assumption that U.S. policy toward Indochina would not require resort to overt combat operations by U.S. forces. Within that framework, the report adhered closely to the Defense Department position that the French, if properly motivated, could win in Indochina, but that their failure to carry through on needed reforms would require U.S. consideration of active involvement. The report noted that:

"There is in Indo-China, or programmed for Indo-China..., a sufficient amount of equipment and supplies and a potential manpower pool sufficient eventually to defeat the Communists decisively if properly utilized and maintained and if the situation continues to permit this manpower to be converted into military effectiveness. Success will ultimately be dependent upon the inspiration of the local population to fight for their own freedom from Communist domination and the willingness of the French both to take the measures to stimulate that inspiration and to more fully utilize the native potential."

The Erskine Report (Part I) recommended: (1) augmentation of the French air force, but not using American personnel; (2) additional U.S. military assistance support of \$124 million (supplementing FY 1954 commitments of \$1.115 billion); (3) elevation of MAAG's status to that of Military Mission, with expanded personnel and advisory authority over training and planning; (4) assignment of additional U.S. personnel with the mission of acting as instructors and performing other key duties within the French forces; (5) Presidential letters to the Heads of State of the Associated States reaffirming our support of their independence and explaining our motivations in assisting them through the French; (6) an effort be undertaken to persuade Bao Dai to take a more active part in the anti-Viet Minh struggle. The report concluded that the program of recommended changes could bring about victory over the Viet Minh if it received full French approval and barring Chinese intervention. No 4

f. The Erskine Report, Part II: Intervention Only After Geneva?

The second part of the Erskine Report did not appear until March 17, 1954, and unlike the first, was the responsibility only of the Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs, with the State Department position "reserved." The report confirmed previous determinations that the loss of Indochina would be a major military and political setback for the United States. It recommended that prior to the start of the Geneva Conference, the U.S. should inform Britain and France that it was interested only in military victory in Indochina and would not associate ourselves with any settlement which falls short of that objective. It further recommended that in the event of an unsatisfactory outcome at Geneva, the U.S. should

pursue ways of continuing the struggle in concert with the Associated States, the United Kingdom, and other allies. The National Security Council was therefore requested to determine the extent of American willingness to commit combat forces to the region with or without French cooperation. But with the Dien Bien Phu siege just beginning, and the Geneva Conference six weeks away, the Erskine Report suggested that the United States influence and observe developments at the Geneva Conference before deciding on active involvement.

g. NSC 177 Annex Raises Intervention Question Anew

Following the second part of the Erskine Report, the President evidently decided that the Special Annex to NSC 177, which had been withdrawn in January 1954, should be redistributed for consideration by the Council's Planning Board. 10/ The Annex to NSC 177 posed the fundamental choice between (a) acceptance of the loss of Indochina, which would be followed by U.S. efforts to prevent further deterioration of our security position in Southeast Asia, or (b) direct military action to save Indochina before the French and Vietnamese became committed to an unacceptable political settlement at Geneva.

Among the alternative courses of action outlined in the Annex, two in particular -- both geared to direct U.S. action prior to a Geneva settlement -- were discussed. Under the first, based on French consent to continue fighting, the U.S. was urged to (1) seek a Franco-Vietnamese settlement of the independence issue, (2) insist upon a build-up of indigenous forces with U.S. advisory and material support, (3) demand the maintenance of French forces in the field at their then present level, and (4) prepare to provide sufficient U.S. forces to make possible the success of a joint effort. Full internationalization of the war would be discussed with the French later, thereby discounting immediate action in concert with the British or Asian nations.

The second alternative assumed a French pull-out. In such a case the United States could either accept the loss of Indochina, or adopt an active policy while France gradually withdrew its troops. Should we accept the latter course, our "most positive" step offering "the greatest assurance of success" would be, NSC estimated, to join with indigenous forces in combatting the Viet Minh until they were reduced "to the status of scattered guerrilla bands." U.S. land, sea, and air forces would be involved.

The Annex was based upon assumptions that U.S. involvement against the Viet Minh would not provoke massive Chinese intervention, would not lead to direct Soviet involvement, and that there would be no resumption of hostilities in Korea. It acknowledged that any change in these assumptions would seriously jeopardize the success of the alternatives proposed. In particular, it noted that U.S. participation heightened the risk of Chinese intervention, and Chinese entry would alter radically both the immediate military situation and U.S. force requirements.

h. Army Questions Feasibility of Air-Naval Intervention and
Outlines Ground Forces Requirements

The principal result of the discussions on the NSC 177 Special Annex was to bring into the open the issue of the costs in manpower and materiel of a U.S. involvement. The Army was critical of contingency planning that was based on the assumption that U.S. air and naval forces could be used in Indochina without the commitment of ground combat forces. General Matthew B. Ridgway, Army Chief of Staff, later wrote in his Memoirs that he was quite disturbed at talk in high government circles about employing air-naval power alone in Indochina. An Army position paper submitted to the NSC in the first week of April, 1954, argued as follows:

"1. U.S. intervention with combat forces in Indochina is not militarily desirable...

"2. A victory in Indochina cannot be assured by U.S. intervention with air and naval forces alone.

"3. The use of atomic weapons in Indochina would not reduce the number of ground forces required to achieve a victory in Indochina.

"4. Seven U.S. divisions or their equivalent, with appropriate naval and air support, would be required to win a victory in Indochina if the French withdraw and the Chinese Communists do not intervene. However, U.S. intervention plans cannot be based on the assumption that the Chinese Communists will not intervene.

"5. The equivalent of 12 U.S. divisions would be required to win a victory in Indochina, if the French withdraw and the Chinese Communists intervene.

"6. The equivalent of 7 U.S. divisions would be required to win a victory in Indochina if the French remain and the Chinese Communists intervene.

"7. Requirements for air and naval support for ground force operations are:

a. Five hundred fighter-bomber sorties per day exclusive of interdiction and counter-air operations.

b. An airlift capability of a one division drop.

c. A division amphibious lift.

"8. Two U.S. divisions can be placed in Indochina in 30 days, and an additional 5 divisions in the following 120 days. This could be accomplished without reducing U.S. ground strength in the Far East to an unacceptable degree, but the U.S. ability to meet its NATO commitment would be seriously affected for a considerable period. The amount of time required to place 12 divisions in Indochina would depend upon the industrial and personnel mobilization measures taken by the government..." 11/

1. Defense-JCS "Solution": Rectify French Deficiencies

Faced with estimates that U.S. air-naval action could not turn the tide, and that U.S. ground forces of appropriate size would impinge upon other commitments, DoD and the JCS took the position that an alternative military solution existed within the reach of the French which required no U.S. intervention. DoD argued that the three reasons for France's deteriorating position were (1) lack of the will to win; (2) reluctance to meet Indochinese demands for true independence; (3) refusal to train indigenous personnel for military leadership. Defense believed that premature U.S. involvement would therefore beg the basic question of whether the U.S. was prepared to apply the strongest pressure on France, primarily in the European context, to attempt to force the French in Paris and in Indochina to take appropriate measures to rectify these deficiencies. Only if these measures were forthcoming, DoD held, should the U.S. seriously consider committing ground forces in defense of the interests of France and the Associated States. The net effect of the Defense-JCS position was to challenge the notion that a quick U.S. military action in Indochina would be either feasible or necessary.

3. The New Approach: "United Action"

At this juncture the Eisenhower Administration began giving serious consideration to broadening any American military intervention in Indochina by making it part of a collective venture along with its European and Asian allies. Secretary of State Dulles in a speech on March 29 warned the public of the alarming situation in Indochina and called for "united action" -- without defining it further -- in these words:

"Under the conditions of today, the imposition on Southeast Asia of the political system of Communist Russia and its Chinese Communist ally, by whatever means, would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that the possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve serious risks. But these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today." 12/

Under Secretary of State W. Bedell Smith's Special Committee on the U.S. and Indochina, to which the Erskine working group had reported, issued a study on April 2. This report went beyond the question of holding Indochina and agreed that whatever that area's fate, the U.S. should begin developing a system of mutual defense for Southeast Asia. For the short term, the Smith Committee favored American sponsorship of a mutual defense treaty directed against Communist aggression in Indochina and Thailand. In the long run, it recommended promotion of a "regional and Asian mutual defense arrangement subscribed and underwritten by the major European powers with interests in the Pacific." 13/

The State Department's thinking in early April 1954 was not greatly at variance from that of Defense and the Smith Committee. Perhaps more so than Defense, State was concerned about the Chinese reaction to a U.S. military intervention. It urged caution and suggested that in any type of "united action" the U.S. make clear to both the Chinese and the allies that the intervention would not be aimed at the overthrow or destruction of the Peking regime. State recommended: (1) no U.S. military intervention for the moment, nor should it be promised to the French; (2) planning for military intervention continue; (3) discussions with potential allies on possibility of forming a regional grouping in the event of an unacceptable settlement at Geneva. 14/

a. Presidential Decision to Support Only "United Action"

Meanwhile, the President decided, following a meeting of Secretary Dulles and Admiral Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, with Congressional leaders on April 3, that the U.S. would not undertake a unilateral intervention. Any U.S. military involvement in Indochina would be contingent upon (1) formation of a coalition force with U.S. allies to pursue "united action"; (2) declaration of French intent to accelerate independence of Associated States; (3) Congressional approval of U.S. involvement (which was thought to be dependent upon (1) and (2)).

These policy guidelines undoubtedly influenced the NSC which, at a meeting on April 6, developed the somewhat incompatible objectives that the U.S. (a) "intervene if necessary to avoid the loss of Indochina, but advocate that no steps be left untaken to get the French to achieve a successful conclusion of the war on their own" and (b) support as the best alternative to U.S. intervention a regional grouping with maximum Asian participation. 15/

The President accepted the NSC recommendations but decided that henceforth the Administration's primary efforts would be devoted toward: (1) organizing regional collective defense against Communist expansion; (2) gaining British support for U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia; (3) pressing France to accelerate its timetable for Indochinese independence. The President would seek Congressional approval for U.S. participation in a regional arrangement, if it could be put together, and meanwhile contingency planning for mobilization would commence. 16/

b. Rejection of Unilateral Intervention

Thus, as the curtain began to fall on the French effort at Dien Bien Phu, and the question of what the U.S. would do became critical, the U.S. Government backed away from unilateral intervention. The Defense Department was reluctant to intervene following the Army's presentation of the view that air-naval action alone would not do the job and ground forces would be needed. The very recent experience of the Korean War mitigated strongly against another American involvement in an Asian land war. Furthermore, the President was not willing to enter into such a venture unless it was cloaked with Congressional approval. Such approval, in turn, depended upon the participation of the allies. Hence, Secretary Dulles undertook the task of persuading Britain, France and the Asian allies to participate in a coalition for "united action" in Indochina.